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Women Artists Sweep Best of 2010 NYC Arts (SLIDESHOW)

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Marina Abramovic, Laurie Anderson, Pina Bausch, Elisabeth Kley, Deborah Kass, Shirin Neshat, Shifting the Gaze, and The Visible Vagina.

For at least a decade, arguably two, there's been ample evidence that an avant-garde not only still exists in contemporary art, but that it's comprised almost exclusively of women. If women's art provokes the strongest reactions, pro and con, it's largely because women have made sexuality and gender not just the subject and context of their art, but the medium to be modeled to suit new social realities and identities. Certainly the strongest work exhibited in New York in 2010 was overwhelmingly by women and reflecting feminist perspectives on sex and gender, to the extent that in every contemporary category I could summon to mind, work by women stood out commandingly.

Click on titles to visit the websites for each show.

Best One-Person Museum Show, *Marina Abramovic, The Artist is Present*, at the Museum of Modern Art

Marina Abramovic's MoMA retrospective was one of the most challenging and ambitious mid-career retrospectives mounted by a museum for a mid-career artist. The logistics of representing over fifty works spanning four decades was made more daunting by the work itself. Consisting

largely of performances, sound works, videos, and installations, many had to be reconstructed and re-performed by actors for the duration of the show. Most challenging were the newly-digitized projections of 1970s performances that couldn't fully restore what decades-old degraded tapes had dimmed, yet which importantly feature Abramovic with her former partner Ulay. The pair helped to redefine the human body in art as a formal, conceptual, and contextual "site" and "sculpture." Perhaps even more significant to contemporary artistic production, the pair were among the first artists to reduce gender difference to near irrelevance.

Fast forward to Abramovic's most compelling work in the retrospective, that made in the decade following her return to her family's homeland, the former Yugoslavia. Impacted beyond expectation by the region's disfigurement in ethnic and religious warfare, Abramovic now considered the art of post-minimalist performance inadequate for expressing the kind of emotional and psychological contents she found herself processing. Her new work depicts elaborately imagined pre-modern rituals centered around the lost myths of the Balkan people--myths of which they were deprived in a succession of foreign invasions over the centuries. To depict these rituals, Abramovic filmed dozens of performers acting out her imagined rituals in a verdant peasant's paradise marked by gender and sexual parity.

Seemingly void of modern sensibilities, the series of performances and films culminate in the visually operatic, yet earthy *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2006), a multi-channel video installation that depicts imagined nature rituals and deity worship enacted by partially clad and nude devotees [see slide]. Easily mistaken for a parody of witchcraft or sexual depravity, the films depict a peasant society that regards sexuality and gender to be gifts from heaven. The peasants show no shame in acts they regard as religious: women raising their skirts in the rain to become impregnated by the male sky deity; men mock copulating with the earth to fertilize the great mother. Absurdly impassioned yet anthropologically inquisitive, *Balkan Erotic Epic* is a wildly inspired bid by an artist to reprise sexual innocence for the divided and battered people of the Balkans. As Abramovic tells it, the execution of the Balkan men and the rape and sexual torture of the women during the recent war was the culmination of a fall from innocence. The filmed rituals may seem uncanny, but in their reprisal of innocence lost, Abramovic questions what kind of fate awaits a society deprived of a deep-seated mytho-spiritual belief system.

Best Museum Group Show: *Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism* at The Jewish Museum, through Jan 30, 2011

An early self-portrait by *Lee Krasner* [see slide] greeting us at the entrance presides over this vibrant group exhibition at the Jewish Museum. Introduced to the world in the 1940s as Jackson Pollock's common-law wife, Krasner went on to become a leading feminist icon in the world of visual art. She remains a role model today for having transcended and debunked the constraints of gender and ethnicity at a time when being a woman and a Jew brought imposed barriers to cultural legitimacy.

Krasner's thoughtful individualism as a painter is channeled by the curators in the act of mounting an exhibition with no other unifying aesthetic, issue, or context other than its Jewishness and womanness. That the show never dissolves into essentialism is entirely attributable to the loose curatorial reigns that allow the artists' individual talents, media concerns, and personal takes on identity and politics to reveal themselves while helping to clarify relationships between three generations of women artists. A number of the artists poke fun at their Jewishness, mock and dismiss male constraints on women, and dare to cross the homosocial and ethnic divides in ways that tear identification away from the collective will and bestow it with the individual. Deborah

Kass's *Double Red Yentl, Split*, from the artist's *My Elvis* series, parodies Andy Warhol's immortalization of Elvis Presley as gunslinger, only transposed with her own lionized image of Barbara Streisand in Yentl drag. The work is a blatantly political co-option of gay-Anglo-male celebrity worship by lesbian-Jewish-gender neutralizing dissidence. Altogether less iconic, Joyce Kozloff's Manhattan streetmap redrawn with streets renamed after famous Jewish women is just as comically audacious and activist. And Nicole Eisenman paints a Seder dinner with a theatrical pastiche of styles ranging from the naturalistic to the surreal to the comically grotesque that recalls the kind of self-deprecating humor that Jewish entertainers made their brand [see slide].

The lighter works never eclipse the serious responses to anti-semitism and misogyny. Starkly standing out are Vivienne Koorland's *War Dawing (IV) Adam: This is The Picture We Saw*, rendered after a young boy's drawing of Jews being herded away by Nazis. Just as affecting is Nancy Spero's 1968 painting of Jewish women of the Holocaust, placed at the points of a Star of David in abject positions that anticipate the paintings of abused women by Sue Williams to come two decades later.

Best Gallery One-Person Show: Deborah Kass at Paul Kasmin Gallery *More Feel Good Paintings for Feel Bad Times*.

Reprising the moods and painterly *modus operandi* she established for her 2007 *Feel Good* exhibition, Deborah Kass again banners lyrics across abstract iconography recalling the art of Andy Warhol, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Bruce Nauman. But what on the surface impresses the viewer as regurgitations of Pop Art, on closer inspection reveals itself to be a self-portrait of a woman artist courageously confessing her life-long envy of, and ambition to become as talented and great as the men of modern art history. Yet, whereas Kass's first show was marked by a vulnerability and self-deprecation resoundly out of sync with an artworld preferring strident dissidence and critique, this time the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim ("Being Alive") and Laura Nyro ("Save the Country") sound a triumphal and clarion fanfare not unlike the finale of a Broadway musical in which the long-struggling heroine at last sublimates all her pain and anguish by making her mark on the world.

Best Gallery Group Show: *The Visible Vagina*, shown jointly at the David Nolan Gallery and the Francis M. Naumann Gallery.

It was a show that more than challenged the disparagement and shame that historically rendered the vagina unclean, hideous, even damning to men. Spanning sixty years, the work assembled by an extensive roll call of artists, both women and men, glorified the vagina in every conceivable way, from the genuinely exquisite and refined to the ironically lewd and pornographic. It's hard to imagine a more ambitious yet diverse assembly of vaginal portraits, ranging metaphorically from the sacred vessel to the profane pleasure box; portal to the world and passage to heaven. For this viewer the most inspired curation was one particular wall at the David Nolan Gallery that lined up the heavy weights of feminism: Hanna Wilke's gum vaginas; Kiki Smith's black clit collage; a section of Carolee Schneemann's famous interior scroll, pulled from her vagina in a legendary 1974 performance; and Mira Schor's literal *Slit of Paint*, opened just wide enough to bestow sight of a floating semi-colon, the punctuation of subject interdependence [see slide]. Schor's coyly cerebral painting is destined to become the icon of feminist art for a new generation of women, potentially having the impact that Judy Chicago's historic and "bloody" Red Flag had on Schor's generation.

At Francis Naumann Gallery, the Guerilla Girls, Nancy Grossman, Jane Hammond, Elisabeth

Kley, Chema Madoz, Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono, and Sherrie Levine made equally potent contributions. Among the men, only Jeff Koons's unusually discreet landscape metaphor *Waterfall Fots (Origin)* (a play on Courbet's *The Source*), David Humphrey's *Clown Girl*, and Hans Bellmer's startling direct *The Story of the Eye* come close to making statements as compelling as the women's.

Best Performance Art: Laurie Anderson, *Delusion* at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)

Laurie Anderson's *Delusion*, a dreamscape of remembrances centering on her mother after her death, may be the artist's most visually, thematically, and musically rhapsodic production. The theatrical montage of film clips, photographic and painted projections, and electro-melodic violin glissades to and from mystical heights were at times as dizzying as they were rooted in the wisdom of the ages [see slide]. Toward the end, Anderson, by now seeming one part charismatic preacher and one part dummy ventriloquist, transported us to a shamanistic vision of our mothers. It came when she spoke of the Buddhist principle that we are each the mother to, and at the same time the child of, all humankind. As she was to tell us how this worked, I found myself to be three-years-old and in a playpen near our family's living room window when, looking out, I saw my mother holding a giant brown teddy bear. When I returned to the performance I felt badly because I'd missed what Anderson had to say. I was told later that everyone was at that point having a mother moment and that I hadn't missed Anderson's description -- I had lived it.

Best Dance Performance: Pina Bausch's *Vollmond* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)

Pina Bausch's *Vollmond* (Full Moon), the choreographer's last work before her death last year, crowned a career of uncompromising authenticity and innovation with her hauntingly enigmatic yet prurient paroxysms spilling out glimpses of love, obsession, compassion, and violence. But more than the skills of the beautifully arrayed dancers, the idiosyncratic movement that has no equal in contemporary choreography, or the evocative minimalist set design, Bausch's overall vision has the novel effect of activating the neurons in the viewer's brain with theatrical stimulants that make our bodies feel as if we're somehow involved in the creative process of the dance. If Twyla Tharp dances make us feel we're up on the stage dancing, Pina Bausch dances make us feel we're editing an elaborate dance film all made up of abrupt cuts and disconnected splices. The continuum of dancer and scenery is very near perfectly resolved, despite being continually inundated by a parade of human flirtations, confrontations, breakups, even a drowning (a murder? a suicide?) -- all enacted with water rapturously and relentlessly pouring down on the dancers and flowing by in a stream that in the blackness glints like a blanket of silver under a full moon. Even when the water isn't the primary visual stimulant, the dancers fling off liquid impressions of Hericlitean flux [see slide]. That the choreography is vivisected into a succession of short, repetitive scenes, makes it easy for us to recall episodes of the dance long after. Very rarely do dances reverberate in the memory for as long as do Bausch's. But remembering passages of *Vollmond* can be as captivating as watching the original work.

Best NYC Film Debut: Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men*, New Director's Series, Lincoln Center Walter Reade Theater

I personally prefer the version of the film *Women Without Men* that director Shirin Neshat installed at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery a few years back. Still, the finished film that last year won the Venice Film Festival's Silver Lion (best director) award and which premiered this spring at

New York's New Director's series at Lincoln Center, introduces a new phase for an artist who manages, however momentarily, to mitigate the antagonism between the West and Iran. That she can accomplish this with starkly iconographic images of the country's resilient and determined women is indication of how unflinchingly political this film is for crossing the steep gender divide imposed on women under Iran's Sharia law. In fact, in comparison with Neshat's earlier photography and films, *Women Without Men* softens the edges of the gender divide by representing women living in pre-revolutionary Iran without the chador. Of course, Neshat's softer gaze comes with her immersion in magical realism, a narrative style inspired by the *Women Without Men* novel by Shahmush Parsipur (*Zanan Bedun-e Mardan* in Farsi). It's a narrative mode not generally well suited to politicized dramas unless it's wielded by masters like Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Isabel Allende. Then, too, Neshat has proved herself to be a master at visualizing the seemingly mystical bonds of women forged behind closed doors [see slide].

Best Ceramics: Elisabeth Kley's *Birdbaths and Birdhouses* at Le Petit Versailles' outdoor garden gallery.

In this decade in which the global art market has become more a mongrel affair than a thoroughbred show, when nations and cultures like China, Iran, and fundamentalist Islam are shaking Western sensibilities to their core, Elisabeth Kley's ability to revitalize ceramic art with an appearance of ancient and far cultural motifs and styles from around the globe is not only timely, it's in tune with the reappraisal of tradition that is marking much of the art being made abroad and newly introduced to the West. Kley's work by and large evokes the distance of time and geography without directly appropriating extant cultural designs. Her work is evocative of something we've seen somewhere in our travels or on museum visits -- at times recalling Persian, Venetian, Florentine, Chinese, and Moroccan design and ornament [see slide]--but truly articulates no one style or artifact we can name or point to. Similarly, Kley's glaze paintings recall arabesques, organic vignettes, manuscript illuminations--though her most significant accomplishment is presenting us a richly variegated cross-culturalism that blurs history, lineage, global politics and identities for a generation of global, aesthete-nomads in pursuit of an eclectic and mutable, if resurrected, beauty.